

# Veterans' Report

Information for South Dakota Veterans

Spring 2003



## Supporting Our Troops – and Veterans

Dear Friend,

South Dakota's own sons and daughters supported the campaign to liberate the Iraqi people with a unique and unprecedented effort, and we here at home have tried to show our appreciation and support through thousands of actions, large and small.

In Congress, my colleagues and I have worked together to demonstrate our support, and that of the American people, for our men and women in uniform. The morning after President Bush addressed the nation to say our troops had launched the first attacks, I joined with Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist to introduce Senate Resolution 95, expressing the Senate's support for our troops, their families, and the President, our commander-in-chief.

Later, I joined with Senator Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), a fellow veteran of the Vietnam era, to introduce a resolution encouraging families of deployed service members to display the Blue Star Service Banner. As you may know, the Blue Star Service Banner is a proud tradition among military families, dating back to World War I. This resolution, which passed the Senate with strong bipartisan support, complements efforts by South Dakota's American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) posts to see this flag proudly reminding South Dakotans of our duty to support the dedicated troops serving on the front lines around the world.

As hostilities wind down, thousands of soldiers are returning home and will soon become our nation's newest veterans. We need to be prepared to meet the needs of these American heroes and their families. Driving around South Dakota, I have seen hundreds of cars covered with bumper stickers that read: "Support Our Troops." I have always thought these stickers should read "Support our Troops – And Veterans." Veterans should not be put on waiting lists for health care when we are fighting a war and debating a large tax cut. Veterans should be one of our very first priorities, not a group that has to fight for essential treatment.

As this latest generation of veterans returns home, it is time for our federal government to redouble its commitment to those who have served. I pledge my ongoing efforts toward this end. As Congress considers ways to improve benefits and services for veterans, I encourage you to share your views and concerns with me.



*Senator Daschle discusses his efforts to improve VA funding with South Dakota leaders of the Paralyzed Veterans of America.*

**Call Tom!**

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# Solutions for Veterans, Military Personnel

**Helping Veterans Returning from Iraq:** The conflict in Iraq has created a new generation of veterans, and we need to ensure that the VA is ready when they return. In April, the Senate approved my plan to provide an additional \$155 million as part of the special wartime appropriations bill.

**Expanding Mental Health Resources to Veterans:** This spring, I worked with leaders in the Department of Veterans Affairs to add a full-time professional position at the Sioux Falls Veterans Center. Each year, the Sioux Falls Veterans Center receives nearly 3,000 visits from patients dealing with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other trauma-related conditions. An additional mental health professional will bolster the clinic's counseling and psychological services.

**Shortening the VA Waiting Lists:** In recent years, thousands of veterans who call the VA to set up a doctor's appointment have been told to wait. President Bush's solution is to block veterans from using the VA, by changing eligibility rules and charging millions of dollars in new fees. But I believe the answer is to eliminate misguided VA rules that impede veterans seeking to fill prescriptions and to change the VA funding system so that funding automatically rises when more veterans are trying to use the system. Both proposals are included in my bill, S. 19, introduced in January.

**Ensuring Fair Treatment for Military Retirees:** Under current law, a veteran cannot concurrently receive both military retirement pay and VA disability benefits. Instead, a disabled veteran's retirement pay is reduced dollar-for-dollar against his or her disability compensation. This is unjust, and the time to rectify it is long overdue. That could happen with S. 19, my own legislation, or with S. 392, the Retired Pay Restoration Act of 2003, which I have cosponsored. Both bills would allow 2,000 military retirees in South Dakota – and more than 500,000 nationwide – to receive both their full retirement pay and their full disability benefits.

**Demanding Tax Fairness for the Guard and Reserve:** As we ask military personnel to risk their lives in service of our country, we need to ensure that we take care of the nearly 5,000 Guard and Reserve members and their families here in South Dakota. Recently, the Senate passed the Armed Forces Tax Fairness Act of 2003, legislation I have supported since 2001. Among other things, this bill will make all military death gratuity payments tax-free and allow members of the National Guard and Reservists to deduct the costs associated with service-related travel.

**Establishing Quality Health Care Options for Guard and Reserve Families:** Although our nation now relies heavily on Guard and Reserve forces, their benefits have not kept pace with their new duties. To address this inequity, I have joined a bipartisan group of Senators in introducing legislation to allow all Guard and Reserve members to participate in the military health care system by paying a modest premium.



*Senator Daschle participates in a roundtable discussion with veterans and ROTC Cadets at South Dakota State University about Iraq and the needs of returning troops.*

# South Dakota's Role in the Liberation of Iraq

- On April 7, a B-1 bomber from Ellsworth Air Force Base destroyed a bunker in downtown Baghdad that was believed to hold Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. The mission received extensive media coverage, and the crew members have been awarded the Air Force Distinguished Flying Cross: Capt. Chris Wachter, the commander; Lt. Col. Fred Swan, the weapons system officer; Capt. Sloan Hollis, the co-pilot; and Lt. Joe Runci, the offensive systems operator.
- More than 2,000 South Dakotans, from all branches of the military service, have participated in the campaign in Iraq. The largest contingent, about 900 people, is from Ellsworth. In addition, six Guard and Reserve units from South Dakota were in the Middle East in late April.
- Nearly 2,000 troops from the South Dakota National Guard, as well as the Army and Navy Reserve, have been mobilized since last fall. This is one of the highest per-capita totals among all 50 states and our state's largest Guard mobilization since World War II.



*Senator Daschle speaks to Native American veterans in Mission. Daschle has joined Native Americans in the state and across the country to honor PFC Lori Piestewa, a member of the Hopi tribe who became the first Native American woman killed in combat.*

## Americans Stand United Behind Our Troops

Long before the first shots were fired, our military personnel and their families were saying their goodbyes, leaving their civilian jobs, and rearranging their lives. Their dedication, professionalism, and willingness to make personal sacrifices have been visible like never before.

Thousands of South Dakotans have found their own ways to help support the troops, whether it was sending a care package, helping a military family with snow shoveling, or saluting a motorcade of departing Guard personnel. Local veterans' posts have also been active, providing families with financial assistance or presenting them with Blue Star Service Banners to signify that they have a family member on active duty.

Helping Guard families gain access to health care has been one of my key priorities during this period. In the weeks after the South Dakota Guard mobilization began, it came to my attention that Guard families were not receiving the health coverage provided to other active-duty military families. Apparently due to bureaucratic problems at the Pentagon, Guard families nationwide were being placed in a plan they considered inferior, which charges annual deductibles of up to \$300 per family and a 20 percent copayment for outpatient care. By law, they should have paid nothing. Amazingly, South Dakota Guard officials were told it might take months or even a year to correct. Determined to address this problem immediately, I contacted Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and had the problem fixed in a number of days.

Also, in early April, I joined with Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska to introduce a resolution of support for our troops and their families, and to urge families to display the Blue Star Service Banner, an old American tradition dating back to World War I (see front page). Our proposal, Senate Concurrent Resolution 36, won overwhelming support and was passed on April 11.

To learn more about efforts to bolster our troops, please visit the "Supporting Our Troops" section of my web site at: <http://daschle.senate.gov/troops.html>.



# Tom Daschle Wants to Hear From You

## Agent Orange Breakthrough

Veterans have long sought answers about the health effects of exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides used in Vietnam, but been told by their government that meaningful studies would be difficult or impossible to conduct. That theory has now been proven wrong, and I will fight to move ahead with new research.

The breakthrough was announced in April. Columbia University scientists examined the records from every herbicide spray mission flown over Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia and entered dates, map coordinates and spray volumes into a computer database. The database was combined with computer-mapping technology to create a system for estimating an individual's exposure to herbicide.

This research also found that the amount of dioxin sprayed during the Vietnam War was more than double previous estimates.

As a result of these new findings, the National Academy of Sciences has recommended the government promote further research into the links between Agent Orange and specific health conditions, such as certain cancers. I am working with the Senate Appropriations Committee to fund this research.

## Tom Needs Your Input!

South Dakotans are some of the most patriotic people in America. We have always held in high regard our men and women in uniform, and we have always honored our commitments to them as veterans.

These days, we understand there is no room for complacency when it comes to defense of our nation. Likewise, there is no room for complacency in caring for our veterans. The needs of America's veterans are constantly evolving, and there is always room for improvement in the way our country serves them.

I've been around long enough to know that the needs of South Dakota veterans are best understood by South Dakotans, not officials in Washington. Because the questions we face are difficult, and because the stakes are too high to permit failure, I am asking for your help in improving access to health care, updating VA benefits, and ensuring that new claims are addressed quickly.

On this page, I have listed my contact information. If you have any thoughts, ideas, concerns, or suggestions, please take a few minutes to share them with me.

## Contact Tom Daschle

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Our nation owes an enormous debt of gratitude to our veterans. They answered the call, and now we have an obligation to provide the benefits and services they were promised. I'm confident that together we can fulfill that responsibility.

I look forward to hearing from you.